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ABSTRACT

Dramatic theory in the past has been confused with hypothesis, hunch, manifesto, and observation. It is, in fact, a scientific activity--much like theorizing in physics, human society, or art. The current state of the art of theory in the drama classroom faces many problems. Most theatre faculty offer courses called "Theory and Criticism" that are just history--the story of theatrical opinion told simply because it was said. Courses that evaluate works of the past and then synthesize them with what is happening today are almost nonexistent. What is lacking are questions that ask not what was said but why, was it accurate, and is it accurate now? There are both an introspective theory of theatre, which is idealistic with no regard for systematic observation, and a scientific theory, which does not include knowledge of human behavior. For accurate comprehensive theory in theatre, scholars advanced in the techniques of observation and explanation should synthesize and integrate their observations with received theory, and pass this on to students for their own synthesis. Hypotheses advanced in theory must be disposed of, by integration or refutation, and not allowed to simply disappear. We must catch up with what scientists in other disciplines have learned about the mechanisms of behavior, the techniques of inquiry and explanation. (HTH)

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THE DECADENCE OF DRAMATIC THEORY

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Perhaps "stillbirth" or "hysterical pregnancy" would be better metaphors for what I'll describe today. As we all know, the theory of theatre took its first stumbling steps with Aristotle. And then...and then it gets a little harder to find the path, to find works of substance which truly illuminate what we do in the theatre. And Aristotle, for all his brilliance, does not suffice.

It's difficult to discuss theory in this territory. For a start, there is no general understanding of what we mean by the term. I'll tell you what I mean by it, which, of course, is what I think we ought to mean by it. My definition claims to be the one current in the Physical Sciences, Philosophy, the Social Sciences, in fact, wherever scholars take theory to be of some importance. But first let me dispose of several things which have passed for theory but are not. For example, theory is not most of what is taught in courses in Theory and Criticism.

But to be a bit more exact:

- Theory is not something posited as a tentative guide for research. That is an hypothesis. It has a place in theoretical work, but it is not theory. (So we should stop referring to Brecht's "theory of Alienation" and speak of his "hypotheses about and techniques of Alienation." The theory of Alienation has yet to be adequately articulated, which may explain why we so seldom succeed when we try it.)

- Theory is not whatever seems to us to be so on the basis of intuitive impressions. This is a hunch. Hunches sometimes lead to careful hypotheses, which sometimes lead to tenable theory. But keep an eye on hunches; they tend to become conclusions when we aren't watching.

- A theory is not a formula, a prescription for what should be. Theory has nothing to do with what should be. That is a manifesto and it is not theory, though it may provoke theoretical work. It is, I'm sorry to say, what has passed for theory through most of history.

- Nor is a theory a collection of careful observations. A tenable theory is based on such observation, but it takes more than data to make a theory. Only when precise, substantiated, comprehensive observations of fact are synthesized into an explanation which accounts for what is going on do we have a theory, that is, an understanding.

We find theoretical statements almost everywhere; that is, sentences like the sentences of which theories are made, but only when the data and the explanation are comprehensive, when they account for that part of experience on which we are focusing, do we have a theory. (This paper, by the way, is not theory. It is a harangue, a sub-division of manifesto.)

The theorist's job is to describe (precisely, thoroughly, not at the macrocosmic level of history but microcosmically), and to explain, what we are doing (and have done, and might do) in the theatre, so that we may understand our successes and our failures and see the implications of our work. Theory is an articulated understanding of what's going on and what will happen in given circumstances.

Theorizing is a scientific activity, whether it be theorizing about Physics, Chemistry, human society, or Art. That fact is too often missed. Even Ted Shank, in his generally useful book, falls into the mistake of separating theory in the Arts from theory in the Sciences. Science is our effort to make true statements with some degree of general applicability. The theorist in any field tries to

make true statements which account for experience. Theory in the Arts may be less exact than theory in Physics, but only because Physics is concerned with relatively simple and stable aspects of experience. Our theory is comparable to theory in the Social Sciences; both suffer from the complexity and instability of the subject. Nevertheless, when we try to make true ge eralizations about our work, we are scientists. Art is merely a category of human behavior and is explained just as all human behavior is; there is no inscrutable magic. Shank's effort to explain theory is damaged by the traditional failure to distinguish description and explanation from prescription, theory from manifesto.

As you consider this, be sure to draw careful distinctions between making Art, appreciating Art, and understanding Art. Only the last is a matter for scientific inquiry, though a solid understanding may enhance our ability to make and appreciate.

Before proceeding to my impression of the "state of the Art," I'd like to dispose of a couple clichés. Let's purge from our conversation the foolish statement that "it's fine in theory but it doesn't work in practice." It is essential that we believe a theory to be untenable whenever careful observation reveals that the theory does not describe reality accurately. The only criterion for fineness in a theory is its correspondence with practice. Till generalizations are proven tenable by careful observation of practice, they are merely hypotheses and exist only to guide observation.

And let us stop speaking of "so and so's theory" as opposed to "whatchamacallit's theory," Brecht's theory as opposed to Artaud's, for example. Neither are theories. We need to develop the habit of speaking of "our theory"; that is, our accumulated understanding of our work. Brecht and Artaud, where they disagree, disagree on what should be, not what is. It is reasonable for us to argue about

Brecht's opinion as opposed to Artaud's opinion; that argument may, in a particular situation, have more urgency than long-range theoretical questions. But that game is played by different rules and doesn't lead, in itself, to a common understanding of what is going on.

I believe that we as a profession have not, but had damn well better, pool our resources in an effort to articulate and substantiate a common understanding of what's going on. This understanding, rather than the individual, intuitive, un-articulated, unexamined, fragmentary, unverified impressions we all entertain, should be the take-off point for our manifestos. I suspect that our lact of such a common understanding is the reason our manifestos so seldom persuade, the reason they move only the already converted and are so quickly discarded. If we don't share a starting point, a basic set of assumptions, we will not proceed by rational argument but will continue as so many religious sects: find the one you are intuitively attracted to and become a disciple.

The appeal for a common understanding does not imply an Absolutist attitude. If anything is now clear, it is that explanations are always <u>of particular situations</u> and that the situation is constantly changing. Our theory cannot explain "what is so" in a permanent sense. It will explain what is going on and why <u>these</u> circumstances have produced <u>such</u> goings-on. When the goings-on change, our theory <u>enlarges</u> to accommodate our new experience. Occasionally, we see that our earlier understandings were erroneous and we cast them off, but our theory is not something we will reject each time we shift our goals or our taste. Only manifestos are so ephemeral. Good theory matures by revision and expansion, not by changing brands. We need not fear that a common understanding will lead to uniformity. Engineers don't all drive the same kind of car, but they're likely to drive good ones. A common foundation will make our individuality less

capricious, more likely to truly satisfy us, without homogenizing us.

THE STATE OF THE ART

Time requires me to be less tactful and more simplistic than I would like. Please believe that, at a better moment, I would carefully qualify and provide evidence for all the horrible generalizations I am about to make. Let the first generalization be the most sweeping: in both the doing and the teaching of theory, we're in bad shape, perhaps a century behind the Physical Sciences, fifty years behind Philosophy, Psychology, and the Social Sciences, in our technique of inquiry and our accumulated understanding.

In the Classroom:

Problem one: the basic omission. Every reputable faculty of theatre offers a course or courses which they think of as Theory and Criticism. Almost without exception, these courses are in fact History; the story of theatrical opinion told simply because it was said. Where are the courses which evaluate and synthesize the theoretical work of the past and explain what is happening today? Where are the courses in Theorizing? Almost non-existent. Do our students emerge understanding what is known of the workings of theatre or merely what was said?

Of course we must consider the history of opinion, but this will not, in itself, lead to an understanding of theatre or to the skills with which we might construct our own understanding. Nor do most of our courses in acting, directing, and design, which commonly provide procedures, attitudes, routines, not understanding. Our textbooks, as we are usually quick to admit, deal almost exclusively with the most routine of routines. Don't most of us use them by default and assure our students that what really matters is omitted? This is notoriously true of our directing texts.

As you consider the design of your theory curriculum, I urge you to imagine a History department with no historiography, a Philosophy department with no logic, epistemology, or semantics, a Psychology department with no statistics or experimental method. And I ask you to imagine a Communication Theory course which deals with the history of opinions, considered independently as mere historical phenomena, without synthesis, without conclusions about the current, common understanding of communication and about the hypotheses currently up for investigation. All unthinkable, as such omissions should be for us.

Problem two: the questions we ask. When we study Aristotle, for example, we concern ourselves almost exclusively with what he said, what he meant. How often do we come to grips with the crucial questions: what of Aristotle's was accurate, then and now? What was Aristotle doing? What kind of statements did he make? What evidence did he provide? Which of his techniques worked for him and would for us? Which of them subverted his purposes and would ours? How do we use him?

Doctoral students are stunned if we ask them to evaluate Aristotle. Evaluate Aristotle?? Outrageous. Aristotle is to be remembered, not judged, not used. We study Aristotle so that we may pass our comprehensives, so that we may get on with our real work. Every graduate student knows Aristotle's six "parts" (I hope). How many know what to do with them? We need to build into every moment of our study of the history of theory the questions "what's going on here?" and "so what?".

Problem three: the canon. The reading list for a typical Theory and Criticism course consists of approximately 40% criticism (that's OK), 50% manifesto (too much, and usually not recognized as manifesto), and about 10% theoretical fragments (too little, and inadequately distinguished from the other two). This

imbalance results partly from a real lack of theory to teach, but it also results from our tendency to ignore the theory of our own century. We're happy to include manifestos from the twentieth century, but we tend to underplay the only moment since Aristotle in which substantial theory has been written. We read Artaud, but how many of us include Jackson Barry? We read the Futurists, but how many study Beckerman? We read Grotowski, but how many deal adequately with J. L. Styan (or with Gross, for that matter)? How many read our only theory journal, Empirical Research in Theatre?

We're still looking for the true religion. We're impatient with the kind of fundamental, methodical, careful work which produces theory, and we love to hop on the bandwagon of the latest bright, and invariably over-simplified, proposal. We are too much like the general public in its love for pop Psychology. Interest is directly proportional to the degree of simplification and excessiveness of the claims. We still believe in a "final solution;" unfortunately, theory tends to appear in very modest packages which almost subliminally enlarge our understanding of theatre.

If little basic theoretical work is done today, a major cause is our disinterest in reading and dealing with the findings of the theorists. Though we read Grotowski and report on him, though with the sketchiest of understanding we even try to imitate him, we don't truly come to grips with him. We've had him for several years now (long enough for him to have abandoned most of his manifesto). Have we really grappled with his notions? Have we drawn into the common understanding that which is valuable is Grotowski? Or did we toy with him for a few years and will we soon pass on?

Look at a few theory reading lists from the 1930's or 40's. You'll find

quite a different set of manifestos. Footprints in the sand; where are they now?

Our current methods of teaching theory contribute to student, faculty, and producer belief that theory is of no consequence, and that belief hamstrings us. What should be the effect? First, students should understand the important function of theory in their own work and in the evolution of their Art. Second, they should know how to use theory in their production work and teaching. Third, they should know how to think theoretically, i.e. to understand and articulate what they do, what they see, and why it is so.

In the Books:

More of substance has been contributed to our understanding in this century than in the previous two millenia. Yet, considering our potential, what we have accomplished is pitifully little. Valuable new techniques of inquiry are now available to us and we are supported by an academic system which gives us time (though it doesn't seem like it) and rewards us for achievement. We are free and potentially able to carry out the investigations which might lift our trade out of the seat-of-the-pants category and make it a true discipline.

Like you, I dislike narrow categories, recognize their danger, but I must use a few today to clarify my point. Please don't believe in them, and do discard them when you leave.

What have we that is theory or something vaguely like theory?

1. PEDANTRY: Almost all of this appears in our textbooks. Perhaps we should include Allardyce Nicoll. Pedantry, with no concern for verification or usefulness, summarizes, simplifies, stereotypes the opinions of the past, particularly those opinions which can be set

down in the form of lists or category systems. How many times in our directing texts have we had to settle for a pitiful rehash of Aristotle's six parts, with his definition of tragedy tossed in, none of it grappled with? Or for simplistic schemes of genres? These are the parts of the books the students skip. Why not? They threaten to reduce our understanding of theatre to sterile cliché.

2. MANIFESTOS: Our favorite books are manifestos. A congenial manifesto is as good as a caffein fix; it gets us going and it's not really necessary to understand it or evaluate it carefully. Here we have Eric Bentley, Grotowski, Artaud, Peter Brook, most of Brecht, most of Schechner, and a host of others. These are wonderful books, but they do not suffice. They offer provocation; they stimulate our imagination and provide matter for conversation. But they are dangerous because we understand so little the difference between manifesto and theory; we don't know the ground rules for each well enough.

From each of these men, a good theorist could draw many hypotheses which might lead to real growth of understanding. Unfortunately, this seldom happens. We pick and choose. We join or dismiss. We like it and take it for gospel or don't and call it bullshit. How seldom we come to grips with it. Most of these manifestors could be good theorists if they didn't have those big axes to grind and were willing to spend some time checking their impressions. Well, let's bless them for their provocation and find others to do the theoretical work.

3. INTROSPECTIVE THEORY: As we get closer to substantial theory, the categories become a bit more complex. The people in this group are trying to do theory, but their effort is undermined by their world-view. They are the last of the Idealists. They believe that introspection is sufficient in itself, that systematic observation is not required. Some of them are Rationalists, like Plato; some are Intuitionists like the Romantics. They share an Idealism and an Absolutism which most of the scholarly world has cast off. It is the same Absolutism which corrupted so much of the history of aesthetic opinion. This group inadequately grasps our new awareness of the importance of world-view, of moment, class, taste, etcetera. This orientation leads only to the assertion of opinion since the basic premise of all arguments is known by direct insight into the nature of the immaterial, transcendent Ideal. There is no way to argue with an Idealist because your evidence means nothing to him.

The best of these are Francis Fergusson and Suzanne Langer, I think. The worst includes Northrop Frye. Somewhere in between is Michael Goldman. They are analogous to the churchmen: all observation is determined by a doctrine drawn from introspection. They are fascinating, but reductive, because their notions are not based on the real world but on direct, private knowledge of Ideal worlds which exist only in the mind or in some unexaminable, transcendent sphere. I hesitate to ask why such an orientation is so attractive to artists. Is it because it turns theory (which should be Science) into another kind of Art and frees us from the demands of rigor and evidence, validating our natural desire to yield unquestioningly to impulse?

Philosophy has recently pulled itself out of this same bog. Aesthetics is trying to. One of the most promising signs in the theatre is that we too are beginning to have due respect for controlled observation. In the late sixties, mindlessness came near to being institutionalized in the theatre; pedantry was banished and whim mounted the throne. But that moment seems to be passing.

The secondary fault in this category is the turning inward, the belief that by studying the theatre and, perhaps literature, we can understand the theatre. It just ain't so. Theatre cannot productively feed upon itself in its Art or its Science. Theatre is made of life. An adequate understanding of theatre will have to begin with a broad understanding of human thought, feeling, and behavior. And this approach has begun to emerge, fortunately, as the major theoretical current of our time.

4. SCIENTIFIC THEORY, TURNING INWARD: Here we cast off the Idealist error, but we still turn inward. We start our climb too many rungs up the ladder and leave behind the knowledge of human behavior which must be the prime corrective to our observation in the theatre. Here we find Ted Shank, Bernard Beckerman, and J. L. Styan who seem to me to represent the fullest flowering of an approach that is not quite adequate.

5. SCIENTIFIC THEORY, REACHING OUT: The godfather here is Aristotle and the pattern he set seems to provide our best hope. Not his conclusions, of course, but his methods when he applied them well. No one ever reached out farther or labored more to verify his impression. He

stumbled, as we all do, but he showed us how it might be done.

Stanislavsky made the first, faltering efforts in our time to play the game by the Aristotelean rules, partly because he reached out to the Psychologists and the Physiologists for help, partly because he revised and enlarged his understanding each day as he watched what happened in the theatre with a merciless eye directed at himself and his actors. Happily, our tools and resources are better than his.

I would put Jackson Barry's book, Dramatic Structure, in this category. I would surely put here the work of the empiricists, the quantitative researchers, even though they still lack the synthesizers who will turn their meticulous observations into understanding.

Outside the theatre, but near it, I would direct you to Morris Weitz who seems to me to talk the clearest sense of anyone since I. A. Richards. Forgive me if I put my book in this category, but where else would you have guessed I'd put it?

Of course all these placements are arguable. My purpose was merely to show the variety of approaches we have taken and to indicate why I believe it is important for us not to neglect the scientific orientation and the long out-reach.

I don't damn the manifestos, but I worry that until we develop a system for using the stimulus of these manifestos, for sucking the value out of them, they will be nothing more than games we play to give ourselves the feeling that we are up with what's happening. The basic metaphor in Tom Stoppard's Jumpers haunts me. We keep from being mere mental gymnasts by finding real work for our skills to serve, work that produces something of general and lasting value.

So there you have my rough-hewn notion of where we stand. I want to finish with a few words about what we need.

THE FUTURE:

I'm going to assume that you're with me in the belief that theory does matter. Even if you doubt that the artist needs it (which I don't doubt), surely there is no denying that the teacher must have it. Otherwise he merely teaches his students to imitate him...a teaching routine to create a performance routine. Theory frees us, as teachers and artists, to always seek a better way.

If it is important, how do we get it? We need, at a minimum, two things:

1) A community of scholars, advanced in the techniques of observation and explanation, focusing, carefully, on the theatre of today, determined to understand it, synthesizing their observations, integrating them with the body of received theory, conducting experiments, when necessary, to select the most valuable and illuminating among competing hypotheses, and passing their findings on to artists and teachers to make of what they will.

2) If this community of scholars is to succeed, it requires a mechanism which does not now exist in our field. I'm sure you know that in almost any other discipline, theory develops in a pretty typical pattern: new hypotheses are presented publicly, evidence and argument are accumulated which confirm or disconfirm the hypotheses. The discipline doesn't rest until the new proposal has been disposed of, either by integration into the body of received theory, or by public refutation.

In theatre, hypothesis after hypothesis is advanced and disappears

leaving hardly a ripple. We don't feel obliged to fully understand or to test them. We merely ignore them, the good and the bad, unless they strike our fancy. And so we have change but little progress.

The first step in establishing such a mechanism is up to our editors. They are the ones who decide whether an issue will be dropped or pursued. But two more things are needed at a minimum. We must have a greater outlet for our scholarly work and we must read more. Unless we read and care, none of the rest matters.

CONCLUSION:

So what my harangue boils down to is this: as students of theatre, we have settled for too little. In the name of theory, we have routined the history of opinion. As a result, most of us doubt the relevance of theory, believe it to be a sinecure for excessively verbal, inadequately talented academics.

We have ignored the potential of theory to open up new possibilities and to help us to an understanding of our failures. In the name of artistic freedom, we have lost our intellectual rigor and rationalized that loss so successfully that we feel no loss, no guilt, no omission at all. And we have designed a system of education which omits those skills which would allow us to be rigorous, were we so inclined.

If we want to turn this juggernaut around before it pins us against the dead end of total faith in intuition and zero accountability for our teaching, we begin by expanding our own expertise, by catching up with what the scientists in other disciplines have learned of the mechanisms of behavior, of the techniques of inquiry and explanation.

Finally, though much of what I have said is negative, I am basically optimistic about the future of theory. This is a moment of great opportunity. We stand roughly where the Physical Sciences stood early in the 19th century: there are crucial questions to be answered and it is still possible for one person to answer many of them. An individual can be of tremendous importance at this moment. We have had our Francis Bacon, our Isaac Newton, our Galileo. We are ready for a Farraday, a Darwin, a Mendeleev, an Einstein, and a Heisenberg.